

TANGENT

MUSIC FROM THE REAL WORLD

Linda Daniel-Spitz

ORIENTAL SUITE: THE COMPLETE ORCHESTRAL MUSIC 1923–1924

By G. I. Gurdjieff & Thomas de Hartmann. Compiled, researched, and produced by Gert-Jan Blom. Basta Audio Visuals (www.basta-music.com). 2006. 256 pages + four CDs. \$99

Gert-Jan Blom's compelling interest in the music of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949) and Thomas de Hartmann (1885–1956) was awakened by a prophetic dream. While on vacation in late August 2000, Blom dreamed that Gurdjieff appeared with a beaming smile and beckoned him to a row of doors. As each door opened, Blom was handed piles of unidentified "stuff." When his arms were full he turned back to look, but Gurdjieff had disappeared. Eventually, actual "stuff" arrived at his door in Amsterdam, and from a dilapidated, priceless set of old tapes, he published a first set of recordings, with an accompanying book, entitled **HARMONIC DEVELOPMENT: THE COMPLETE HARMONIUM RECORDINGS 1948–1949**. This first project took four years of arduous research, clean-up, and restoration, listening to the faint sounds that remained of Gurdjieff's music as he improvised on the harmonium. Miraculously, Blom was able to salvage nineteen full hours of music from the amateur recordings that documented the last two years of Gurdjieff's explorations of sound. At the same time, he realized that much more material awaited discovery. **ORIENTAL SUITE** is the second of three planned releases.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The music of **ORIENTAL SUITE** brings a new dimension to the body of music generally known as the works of Gurdjieff/ de Hartmann. Until now, the center of this legacy has been a large collection of pieces for solo piano composed during 1924–1927, whose definitive edition in four volumes was

RIGHT: HAND-PAINTED POSTER FOR THE CARNEGIE HALL DEMONSTRATION OF MARCH 3, 1924.

CARNEGIE
HALL
GURDJIEFF INSTITUTE

WILL GIVE
ONLY ONE PUBLIC

DEMONSTRATION

ON MARCH 3RD AT 8-30 P.M.

TICKETS ON SALE
HERE

completed in 2005 by Schott Editions. The new volumes considerably expanded the available piano repertoire and gave rise to a welcome number of recordings by artists such as Alain Kremski, Norman Higgins, Laurence Rosenthal, Elsa Denzey, and Stafford Ordahl, to name only a few. A discography of the recordings is currently in preparation.

The orchestral scores, which directly preceded the works for solo piano, remained obscure. They were vaguely known through various literary references and seemingly relegated to the past. Orchestral scores had been prepared to accompany performances of Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances or Movements during 1923–24, but scarcely anyone had seen the scores in decades. It took the expertise and resources of Blom, in his varied capacities as musician, producer, and archivist, to research and unite the orchestral works, now published as **ORIENTAL SUITE** in four CDs and an informative book. Working with such experts as Thomas C. Daly and his son, Thomas A. G. Daly, whose collection of Gurdjieff/de Hartmann manuscripts yielded all of the scores and a good number of related documents, Blom was able to record the orchestral pieces in two sequences corresponding to the so-called demonstrations of Movements publicly presented first in Paris (1923), and then in New York, Chicago, and Boston (1924).

The exact process by which Gurdjieff and de Hartmann composed such a wide array of musical works will always retain an aura of mystery. Music played a central role in Gurdjieff's life from his earliest years. As he describes in his own books (*MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MEN*, etc.), he heard and absorbed a variety of traditional songs, dances, and meditative

pieces throughout his childhood. Later, when he formed his group of spiritual seekers called "Seekers of Truth," with whom he traveled throughout the Middle East and Asia for some twenty years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gurdjieff and his companions sought every opportunity to understand the laws of music and vibration, through which certain conscious impressions of harmony within man could be revealed.

While Gurdjieff was not a trained musician in the European tradition, his pupil Thomas de Hartmann, who joined Gurdjieff in 1917, was a high-ranking composer of the Russian school who had studied under brilliant masters such as Anton Arensky and Sergei Ivanovich Tanieff. Although de Hartmann enjoyed unparalleled success with each new work, he remained in doubt as to the meaning and direction of his music. What he called "something else" was missing, but what? His meeting with Gurdjieff, as described in his autobiographical memoir *OUR LIFE WITH MR. GURDJIEFF*,¹ opened entirely new perspectives, not only in regard to music broadly speaking but also in regard to that missing "something else." Today we might summarize this encounter with the thought that Gurdjieff embodied a universal "world music," while de Hartmann possessed the training and temperament to grasp and write down a music that was both new in the common sense—original, fresh, compelling—and ageless.

Blom's comprehensive documentation and careful research have uncovered a wealth of new information and insight about the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann oeuvre. From about 1918 to 1922, the two men worked on the music and choreography for an intended ballet, entitled **THE**

STRUGGLE OF THE MAGICIANS. Several fragments of piano music and the printed scenario still remain of this project. The ballet's choreography, to which Gurdjieff devoted much time, took the form of "Sacred Gymnastics," through which the struggle between a Black Magician and a White Magician was conveyed in move-

of the question that certain of Gurdjieff and de Hartmann's later works for piano, entitled *ASIAN SONGS AND RHYTHMS* (Vol. I), derive in some way from these earlier ethnic pieces.

The next pieces Gurdjieff and de Hartmann undertook together, probably in 1923—when Gurdjieff and his pupils,



OBSERVING THE MOVEMENTS PRACTICE IN THE DALCROZE STUDIO

FROM LEFT: GURDJIEFF, DE HARTMANN (BARELY VISIBLE AT THE PIANO), ALEXANDER DE SALZMANN, MME OUSPENSKY, MRS. NICOLL AND MAURICE NICOLL, AUGUST 1922.

ment and dance. The struggle between white and black magic unfolded through various characters caught between the two, while the backdrop to the drama included a series of ethnic dances attributed to Arabian, Persian, Indian, Greek, Tibetan, and other sources. It is not out

including de Hartmann, were living in Gurdjieff's recently founded Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau-Avon near Paris—led directly to the orchestrations found in *ORIENTAL SUITE*. In *OUR LIFE*, de Hartmann notes that he worked on orchestration

in the summer of 1923, as Gurdjieff began to create more and more new exercises requiring music. Some of the new music accompanied a new type of Sacred Dance, or Movement, quite different from the exercises (the so-called Obligatories) that Gurdjieff had created in earlier years in Tiflis. The new

signature—the notes of an Eastern scale. The melody, with a monotonous beat in the bass, was music for another big dervish dance, for which he began to show the positions. Later, in Paris, when this dance was being orchestrated for the demonstration at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Mr. Gurdjieff asked for some changes in the orchestration. To the fundamental



A TABLEAU FROM "N6 (INITIATION OF A PRIESTESS)"

PARIS 1922

Movements were choreographed as tableaux, in which the files or rows each had their own sequences of positions, creating a complex whole.

De Hartmann himself, usually rather bland in his descriptions of the musical processes, was stunned by the beauty and richness of the new Movements as they were first performed together with the music. He also offers a rare glimpse into Gurdjieff's role in the creation of the music:

Soon after that Mr. Gurdjieff brought me another piece of music paper, with an unusual combination of flats in the key

melody he told me to add, in pianissimo, sub-voices, also constructed on the same scale. These supporting voices were to represent dervishes who were not active in the dance, but who, in low, muffled voices, were chanting their prayers.... The sonority proved strikingly effective.²

The Movement he refers to, THE GREAT PRAYER (CD 1, track 9; CD 3, track 9), was one of the longest tableaux, surpassed in length only by THE INITIATION OF A PRIESTESS (CD 1, track 7; CD 3, track 7), for which the choreography has been lost. Musically, one may note that an exercise such as the FIRST DERVISH PRAYER (CD 1, track 10; CD 3, track 10), a slightly less

complex tableau, nonetheless comprises three separate elements performed simultaneously, while the music also includes three distinct elements: the ostinato bass, the middle layer of homophonic chords, and an ornamental flute melody two octaves above the chords (therefore five octaves above some of the bass notes).

Eventually, the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann oeuvre came to include piano reductions of the orchestral pieces for Movements, but immediately following the Movements Demonstrations (see below) for which the orchestrations were made, the two men turned to composing yet another new type of music for piano solo. In these works, composed from about 1925–1927, one finds tremendous new variety and also series of pieces, such as Greek or Armenian songs, dances, and melodies, that hark back to Gurdjieff's roots. Other groupings, however brief, include a "Skridlov" series in homage to Gurdjieff's friend, Professor Skridlov, a "Tibetan" series, a Russian Orthodox series of Easter Hymns named for specific liturgical days, and five fragments from *THE STRUGGLE OF THE MAGICIANS*. Happily, the extraordinary music originally composed for the lost Movement, *THE INITIATION OF A PRIESTESS*, is also included in the works for piano solo.

Gurdjieff and de Hartmann parted ways in 1929 under circumstances that are very much a part of the legend attaching to each man. De Hartmann stayed in France and resumed work as an independent composer. He and his wife, Olga, eventually emigrated to Montreal, Canada. Gurdjieff himself composed no more music, at least not as it had been possible with Thomas de Hartmann, but later on he created many improvisations on his harmonium. Fully documented in

Blom's first set of recordings (*HARMONIC DEVELOPMENT*), these pieces often bear a strong resemblance to the earlier melodies for piano or instruments, although their purpose was quite different. The harmonium served as an instrument of meditation and a vehicle for Gurdjieff's intimate knowledge of the science of music and vibration.³

THE MOVEMENTS DEMONSTRATIONS

Although the principal aim of Blom's recordings is to recreate the authentic musical substance of the Movements Demonstrations, many of the texts anthologized in *ORIENTAL SUITE* evoke the writers' impressions of the dances or Movements. Blom's research led to the discovery of an astounding number of documents relating to the Movements and the conditions in which they were taught or witnessed. Through reading the accounts side by side, one gains unexpectedly vivid impressions; something about the aim of the Demonstrations themselves seems to come alive.

Gurdjieff never said exactly why he wished to present the Movements Demonstrations, first to the Parisian public, later to the American public. His interest in choreography, music, lighting, and staging is evident in the pains he took to organize *THE STRUGGLE OF THE MAGICIANS*, which in the end was never produced. It is also clear that in 1922, when Gurdjieff and his followers arrived in France and settled at the Prieuré Fontainebleau-Avon, he worked with a "demonstration" class, among whose participants were several Russian pupils, in addition to the general classes open to all residents of the Institute. According to Blom, some members of the class, including Jeanne de Salzmann, the



French pupil to whom Gurdjieff later entrusted the continuation of his teaching, had worked on the exercises since Tiflis (1918), and once the group settled at the Prieuré, the class seems to have practiced for many hours each day. (The class's thorough knowledge of the exercises may explain why some of the tempi indicated by de Hartmann in the scores for *ORIENTAL SUITE* are unusually quick.)

In the wider picture of Gurdjieff's teaching, the prospectus he produced for the Institute at Fontainebleau-Avon (reproduced on pages 110–20 in Blom's book) leaves no doubt that his fundamental concern for humankind reposed on his direct perception of an imbalance in the three parts of our psyche, which he terms "the intellectual, emotional and instinctive or moving life of man" (p. 114). Certain pupils, such as Marthe de Gaigneron, who became a central teacher later on, have shed more light on the subject through their own experience:

The Movements call to "the whole of our being," through many different means. This explains their amazing diversity. They exercise more specifically one function or another and often rely on tempos totally different from those experienced in daily life. A Movement such as "Circles," for instance, which is done seated, enables one to reach an inner stillness of such quality that the movement itself, in its magical slowness, seems to produce a "sound."⁴

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ORIENTAL SUITE⁵

ORIENTAL SUITE presents several unknown aspects of the musical works of Gurdjieff

THE FINAL MEASURES IN DE HARTMANN'S SCORE FOR "N8 (THE GREAT PRAYER)," INDICATING THAT THESE SHOULD BE PERFORMED THREE TIMES

and de Hartmann. The recordings, produced in the Netherlands and performed by the Metropole Orchestra (for the Paris orchestrations) and the Little Orchestra (for the American versions), document in minute detail everything known about each of the orchestral scores. As a result, one hears something very close to the original sound of the Demonstrations.⁶

At the same time, from these early musical works by Gurdjieff/de Hartmann one realizes that music was far from an isolated phenomenon in their work, and in fact embodies almost every aspect of Gurdjieff's teaching, both as it existed in 1922 and as it remains today. For example, the writer Kathryn Hulme described the following exchange from December 1936:

After a wonderful dinner he plays a new music, then he asks Miss Gordon, "Which you like best, what you eat or what you just now hear?"

GORDON: "But it is such a different thing, Mr. G."

G: "For me all is same. Different octave but from same scale I compose. I hope someday the unity of the law of Heptaparaparshinokh you will understand—everywhere is same."⁷

Further, an observation from Madame de Salzmann, ostensibly in reply to a question about musical clefs:

"I know this because I found it out for myself—Mr. Gurdjieff did not explain it to me." She went on to say how "this is all here," tapping the copy of *Fragnents*, which she held between her hands; how if we read and understand the chapter on the Law of Seven, we will understand also about his music. It is all concerned with

the octave. By "clef" he does not mean what is meant in ordinary music. This has great significance for him, and the Movements also are based on this same octave.⁸

My point in quoting these passages is that **ORIENTAL SUITE** is full of completely new impressions, which the music calls us to experience as wholly as possible. The listener is at times bombarded with an intensity of sound that is entirely mysterious, even shocking, yet we follow intently as the music is transformed by new colors, new sonorities, and perhaps we feel something of the laws described above. This connection between music and ideas, dare one say, even touches a new sense of relationship within.||

1 Thomas de Hartmann and Olga de Hartmann, **OUR LIFE WITH MR. GURDJIEFF** (London, Penguin Arkana, 1992).

2 Thomas de Hartmann and Olga de Hartmann, **OUR LIFE WITH MR. GURDJIEFF**, pp. 155–156.

3 The meditative aspect of the harmonium music was kindly recounted to me by Dushka Howarth, who recorded many of Gurdjieff's pieces in Paris.

4 Marthe de Gaigneron, "Sacred Dances," **GURDJIEFF: ESSAYS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE MAN AND HIS TEACHING** (Continuum, New York, 1996), p. 298.

5 The title **ORIENTAL SUITE** belongs to a suite of pieces which de Hartmann arranged for orchestra in 1954. The pieces were not composed for the Demonstrations or even for Movements, but exist simply as de Hartmann's last homage to his teacher, G.I. Gurdjieff.

6 See the complete chronology, as compiled by Thomas A. G. Daly in **ORIENTAL SUITE**, pp. 220–247. **7 HARMONIC DEVELOPMENT**, p. 21.

8 Ibid: 81. The book to which Mme. de Salzmann refers as **FRAGMENTS** is published in English as P. D. Ouspensky, **IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS: FRAGMENTS OF AN UNKNOWN TEACHING**, available in many editions.